

1 Corinthians 4:1-21
Isaiah 20
Psalm 139

“Judging by the Way of the Cross”

March 2, 2014

Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush.
Aren't you glad that God hasn't called me to do the same thing?

Paul will say in 1 Cor 4
that the apostles have been called to a very similar calling –
not a temporary symbolic nakedness,
as a sign to the nations,
but as a spectacle to the world –
following in the way of the cross.

So, in other words, God has called me – and you –
to something very much like Isaiah's nakedness.

We're going to be spending the next few weeks talking about “judging.”
When *should* we judge?
When should we *not* judge?

How should we think about judging?

Psalm 139 is a good place to start.
Psalm 139 starts with God's own judgment.
God knows my thoughts.
He knows my inner being –
because he knit me together in my mother's womb.
And so if I am going to understand myself – or anything else –
then I need God's Spirit to illumine me.

Sing Psalm 139
Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-4:21

“Judge not, lest you be judged!”
How often have you heard someone say that?

How should a Christian think about judging?
We live in a day when no one wants to be “judgmental” –
and the greatest virtue is to tolerate (or at least, to be thought tolerant!).

Paul talks a lot about judging in 1 Corinthians:
“The spiritual man judges all things.” (2:15)
So we should judge, right?
“I do not even judge myself...It is the Lord who judges me.” (4:3-4)
That makes it sound like we shouldn't judge!

“Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?
God judges those outside.” (5:12-13)
Okay – so we shouldn’t judge outsiders!

“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?” (6:2)
Wait! I thought we had said *don’t* judge outsiders!

“Judge for yourselves what I say!” (10:15)
“If we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged.” (11:31)

Wait.

The spiritual man judges all things – but Paul doesn’t even judge himself.
We are to judge those inside the church – but the saints will judge the world.
If we judge ourselves truly, we will not be judged.

It might seem that Paul is contradicting himself.
Are you supposed to judge or not?!

We’re going to spend the next few weeks unpacking this.
Paul himself spends 3 chapters working this out.

The basic principle is found back in chapter 1, verse 8:
You are waiting “for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
And as we saw in chapter 1,
“guiltless” is connected to the word “calling” –
the word translated “guiltless” means “one who cannot be called into court.”

What does it mean, “cannot be called into court”?
It could mean “immunity to prosecution.”
Hey, I can do anything I want, and I can’t get called into court!
Woo-hoo! I’m gonna drive 100 miles an hour, and...
It would appear that some in Corinth were taking it that way.
I’m gonna sleep with my father’s wife...
Paul will nix that attitude in chapter 5.

That’s why Paul in chapter 1, verse 9, adds:
“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.”
Your legal status as one who cannot be called into court
is intimately bound up with your new identity as the people of God –
the fellowship – the communal participation – of the Son of God.

To put it simply,
Jesus has endured the last-days wrath of God.
Paul has continually emphasized the *cross*.

Jesus Christ and *him crucified*.

Why?

Because on the cross, the final judgment happened to Jesus.

Judgment Day has already happened.

Those who belong to Jesus have passed through death and judgment
in him.

And that is why Paul will distinguish between judging those “inside” the church,
and judging those “outside” the church.

We *should* have a double standard.

Those inside the church should be held to a higher standard than those outside.

Paul sets up his discussion of judging at the end of chapter 3:

Introduction: “Become a Fool That You May Become Wise” (3:18-23)

¹⁸ *Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*

Paul is playing off of a famous theme in Socrates.

The oracle at Delphi had once said that Socrates was the wisest man on earth.

Socrates himself thought that this was very odd –

since he *knew* for a fact that he knew nothing!

And so he went about interviewing people who were reputed to be wise,

and he discovered that the difference between himself and them,

was that *they thought they were wise*,

but in fact, knew nothing;

whereas he knew himself to know nothing!

And therefore, true wisdom consists in recognizing that you know nothing!

Paul is saying that in one sense Socrates was right –

if you would be wise, then you must acknowledge that you are a fool.

But Paul is also saying something more:

the only path to wisdom is through the folly of the cross.

¹⁹ *For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,”* ²⁰ *and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”* ²¹ *So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours,* ²² *whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,* ²³ *and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.*

How do you think about your teachers?

There is a dangerous tendency among Christians

to gravitate towards those teachers who confirm what you already believe –

refusing to allow the gospel to challenge your preconceived opinions.

Just to give you a hint:

Paul is about to challenge the Corinthians.

Chapters 5-14 will include many topics where Paul will rebuke or correct the Corinthians.

And maybe he will rebuke and correct us.

Chapter 4 is where Paul sets all this up by laying out
how we should listen to the preaching of the Word.

1. The Lord Will Judge – So Don't Play Favorites (4:1-7)

a. Do Not Pronounce Judgment Before the Time (v1-5)

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

How should you think about preachers?

Paul includes both himself and Apollos –

so it's not just how to think about the apostles,

but how to think about all those who preach the gospel.

We are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The word translated “servant” is *not* diakonos (the word used in 3:5),

but is a word most commonly used in the NT of “assistants” or “helpers” –
often used of “guards” or subordinate officials.

Paul rarely uses this word, but he seems to combine it with “steward” here
in order to emphasize the point in verse 2:

² *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

A steward must give an account to his master.

Paul and Apollos must give an account to God

for how they have proclaimed the mysteries of God.

As servants of Christ, they are answerable to Christ.

That's why Paul says in verse 3:

³ *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.*

Paul is still playing off themes in the Trial of Socrates.

In the Greco-Roman world, everyone knew the story of Socrates.

Socrates had been condemned by the Athenians for “corrupting the youth.”

And Socrates willingly drank the hemlock

because he acknowledged that the court of the Athenian citizens
was the highest authority over him.

The people had pronounced judgment and determined that Socrates must die.

If Socrates would run away, then he would overthrow the highest authority –

and *that* would corrupt the youth!

Paul says “for me it is a very small thing” to be judged by a human court.

The judgment that matters to Paul, is God’s judgment.

Last time we looked at how each preacher builds on the foundation of Christ.

Paul has said that each one’s work will become manifest on the Day of Christ.

At the final judgment, God will test the work done by each pastor.

If he has built with gold, silver, or stone –
his work will endure.

If he has built with wood, hay, or straw –
his work will perish.

Therefore, Paul doesn’t worry about what the Corinthians think about his stewardship.

After all, he is not *their* servant, he is *Christ’s* servant!

It can be awfully tempting to say,

“I am God’s steward, therefore I am right!”

But Paul doesn’t say this.

Instead, he says:

⁴ *For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.*

Too often, when someone says, “Don’t judge me,”

they are seeking to justify themselves.

But Paul refuses to justify himself!

I may know of nothing against me, but that doesn’t justify me.

I am not the judge!

If God is the judge of a case, then we cannot proclaim *either* “guilty” or “innocent.”

That’s why Paul says in verse 5:

⁵ *Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

Paul responds to the divisions in Corinth with great care.

He is very careful not to comment on the points of difference.

(That’s why we don’t know the substance of the divisions in Corinth!)

All we know is that some followed Paul, others followed Apollos, others followed Peter,
and others, with air of superiority said, “I follow Christ.”

Paul’s reply is simply, “do not pronounce judgment before the time”

What time?

“before the Lord comes,”
when the Lord Jesus brings to light the things now hidden in the darkness,
and discloses the purposes of the heart.
When the Lord tests the work of each preacher,
then we will know the answers that the Corinthians were bickering about!

Many people have been frustrated that Paul doesn't explain the reasons for the bickering.
And many have sought to “figure it out” from obscure comments that Paul makes.
But there's a reason why Paul doesn't tell us.
He doesn't want to perpetuate the arrogance and slander and factionalism of Corinth!
If he repeats the details, he'll get sucked in!

So, to put it simply, the only things that you should be judging
are things that God has *said* that you should judge.

Paul explains this in verses 6-7:

b. Do Not Go Beyond What Is Written (v6-7)

⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers,^[c] that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

It's not just about Paul and Apollos.

The whole system of pitting “one against another” is contrary to the way of the cross.
You should not be squabbling over who is the better preacher,
or who is the better elder.

“For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh
and behaving only in a human way?” (3:3)

So in matters of church life and practice,
we need to learn “not to go beyond what is written.”

If the Word of God doesn't make a big deal about it –
then we shouldn't either!

Judgment Day is coming –
at which time all other things will be revealed.

But until that Day,
we need to rely on what is written – the Word of God –
as the guide for proper judgment.

⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

What makes you special?

What gives you the right to go beyond what is written?

How often have you seen this?
“Ordinary rules don’t apply to me because I’m special!”

If anyone in the history of the church could claim to be special –
it would have been the apostles – it would have been Paul!

But Paul says, “You are missing the point of the *cross*!”
If you *special* in economy of the gospel,
that doesn’t mean to get to boast –
it means you get to suffer!

2. The Apostles as Spectacle (v8-13)

Listen to how Paul mocks the false theology of glory in verses 8-9:

a. The (False) Theology of Glory... (v8-9)

⁸ *Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!*

This is dripping with sarcasm.

But it would have had clear meaning to the Corinthians –
because in Corinth was the tomb of the Cynic philosopher Diogenes,
who had mocked the Stoics, saying
“I alone am rich, I alone reign as king.”
The Stoics were the original fountain of the “power of positive thinking” –
the “name it and claim it” gospel.

And the Corinthians appear to have blended this with Paul’s claim that Jesus is King –
and we have been united to Jesus,
so therefore, we are rich! We are kings!
Therefore, we should act like it!

This attitude contrasts sharply with the apostles in verse 9:

⁹ *For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.*

The apostles are a spectacle – a theater for the world – for angels and for men – to watch.
As a Roman colony, the Corinthians knew all about spectacles.

And the apostles come at the *end* of the show.

The Corinthians all knew what happens at the end of the games:
when the gladiators – men sentenced to death – came out
and fought wild beasts – or other men – for the entertainment of the masses.
And there you sit – claiming to be rich – claiming to be kings!

The eschatological kingdom *has come* in Jesus.

But it has come *in Jesus* – and so if you want to know what it looks like,
look at Jesus – and look at his apostles.

Paul is challenging you to reconsider your position of privilege and honor.

Most of you teenagers have grown up in privileged homes.

You have received an education that is superior to most of the world.

What are you going to do with it?

Listen to how Paul contrasts himself with the Corinthians:

b. ...Contrasted with the Way of the Cross (v10-13)

¹⁰ *We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.* ¹¹ *To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless,* ¹² *and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;* ¹³ *when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.*

Basically, Paul is saying,

“What is wrong with this picture?”

You are saying that you are special.

You are the spiritual ones who have entered the eschatological kingdom.

You are rich.

You rule.

But that is not the way that you learned Christ!

That's the way of the philosophers – not the way of the cross.

Paul often uses these sorts of lists – whether of the fruits of the Spirit,
or the trials and troubles that he has endured –
and sometimes we can just speed through them.

It's true that Paul is not emphasizing any one of these things.

Rather he is relying on the combination of them to produce an effect:

Verse 10 focuses on the contrast with the Corinthians:

¹⁰ *We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ.*

We are weak, but you are strong.

You are held in honor, but we in disrepute.

Fools – weak – dishonored.

Wisdom, strength, and honor – the things that matter to most people –
are not the things that matter to Paul.

Do you want to be respected by your colleagues and friends?

I understand the lure – but I also know where that will lead!
Once you start to compromise “what is written” – what God has said –
then you are setting worldly wisdom, strength, and honor
as your paradigm –
rather than the cross.

¹¹ *To the present hour we hunger and thirst,
we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless,
¹² and we labor, working with our own hands.*

This is not the picture of a world-changing, powerful band of teachers.
This is the picture of the cross.
Jesus said, “If any one would come after me,
let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”
If you are going to follow Jesus, then you should expect to live his sort of life:
“the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

And then Paul points out that this especially affects how we relate to others:

When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat.

How do you respond when people say nasty things about you?

“We bless”

How do you respond when people scoff and mock your faith?

“We endure”

How do you respond when people lie about you?

“We entreat” (or ‘exhort’)

I know that some of you teenagers have recently faced disappointments
because of the way of the cross.

Following Christ will mean that we don’t quite fit into all the practices of our culture.

But when we don’t fit,

we don’t pitch a fit!

I’m not going to tell you that following Jesus is more fun.

Quite frankly, sometimes it’s not!

(That’s the point of the *cross*!)

A cross-shaped life will be a life that frequently puts you in an awkward position.

But your response – like Paul – will be to bless, to endure, and to entreat and encourage.

So, what is the picture that emerges from this word-painting?

We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

In the eyes of the world, we are worthless – useless.

Scum and refuse are good translations.

Think of scum on the surface of a pond –
or that scummy film on a window that needs to be cleaned.

What use do you have for scum?

We are the world's garbage.

Do we take Paul seriously?

He is the scum of the world – the refuse of all things.
And yet, he says to the Corinthians, he is their father!

3. The Power of Scum (v14-21)

a. Paul as Father through the Gospel (v14-16)

¹⁴ *I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.*

¹⁵ *For though you have countless^[d] guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me.*

If you want to follow Jesus, then you need to imitate those who imitate Christ.

Paul speaks of himself as the “father” of the Corinthians through the gospel.

You have myriads of “paedagogues” – you have many guides/teachers in Christ.

But you have only one father.

Since Paul was the one who first preached Christ in Corinth,
he is the “father” of the church in Corinth.

And your father is the scum of the world!

Remember what Paul has already told them –

not many of you were wise and powerful – not many were wealthy and influential
but God chose the weak and foolish things of the world to shame the wise and powerful.

God chose the things that are not to put to shame the things that are.

And if you want to know what this looks like,
look at Timothy:

b. Timothy as Example of a Faithful Child (v17)

¹⁷ *That is why I sent^[e] you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ,^[f] as I teach them everywhere in every church.*

Timothy knows how to be my child –

and in him you will see and hear my way of life.

The way of Christ is something that Paul teaches everywhere in every church.

But the way of Christ is not something that you can “get” just by hearing it.

It involves a whole pattern of life.

It's why we have two services on Sunday.

It's why we encourage people to be connected during the week.

The *message* of the cross is not just about words.
It has to be embodied in how we live.

And that's where Paul concludes in verses 18-21:

c. The Power of the Kingdom (v18-21)

¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

What is Paul saying?

He has already told us that when he came to Corinth,
his speech and his preaching was in the Spirit and in power (2:4)
Now he says that the kingdom of God is not in speech, but in power (4:20).

In both passages the contrast is between “logos” (word/talk) and “dunamis” (power).

The kingdom of God is not in *word* –
it is not a matter of “talk.”

The arrogant – probably those who were leading the “factions” –
could talk a good game.

But what is their power?

So what is Paul threatening?

Paul says that if they continue in their rebellion,
he will come “with a rod.”

What would that look like?

We'll talk about that next time in chapter 5,

when Paul hands over to Satan the man who has his father's wife.

[Bob Taylor and Michael Duryea]